

A Narrative of the Results of Business Retention and Expansion (BR&E) Initiatives across Minnesota - Based on Six Ripple Effect Maps of Community BR&Es

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Introduction

The Business Retention and Expansion (BR&E) Strategies Program¹ at University of Minnesota Extension is a collaborative process that helps community leaders identify barriers that businesses face. The program was conducted in the communities of Forest Lake, Lyon County, Barnesville, Hugo, Monticello, and Menahga². After the program was implemented, ripple effect mapping was done as a follow-up step³. Ripple effect mapping is a process that evaluates the impact of complex programs through a participatory group process. Participants are asked to map the stories that happened during the BR&E program, based on their retrospective memories. The purpose of the ripple effect mapping activity is to help visualize the ripple effects that have developed in the community due in whole or in part to the BR&E visitation program⁴.

The following narrative is based on a qualitative method of analysis that analyzes and describes the results of the Business Retention and Expansion (BR&E) initiatives in the six

¹ Information about Extension's BR&E Program is available at <http://www.extension.umn.edu/community/business-retention/>

² Summary reports for each community is available at <http://www.extension.umn.edu/community/business-retention/reports-surveys/>. Note that summary reports highlight the BR&E data and some priority project plans at the beginning of the implementation phase. The results of implementation are captured at a later date via the ripple effect mapping process.

³ One ripple map was done in each community except in Menahga which had its first ripple mapping session in October, 2013 and the second session in May, 2016.

⁴ For more information on Ripple Effect Mapping, visit <http://www.joe.org/joe/2014april/tt6.php> and <http://www.extension.umn.edu/community/news/ripple-effect-mapping-making-waves-in-evaluation/>.

Minnesota communities mentioned above. These six BR&Es happened between 2010 and 2014. Note that there were a total of eight BR&E initiatives during this time period. Of the other two communities, one declined to do a ripple map session, and it is hoped that the other community will do a ripple mapping session within the next year. This paper was accomplished by analyzing data from the ripple effect maps in the six communities and then conducting follow-up interviews with a key informant from each community to better understand what appeared on the maps. Once the data was collected, it was coded and key themes were described using examples from the communities. Below are the six themes that emerged. Each example shows how and why the particular theme became apparent in these data. (The days when ripple effect maps were conducted are provided in the appendix.)

Theme 1: Strong Relationships were Formed

A main theme that emerged from the ripple effect mapping was the formation of strong relationships. This is a theme that occurred across all six communities analyzed in this project. The importance of the theme was emphasized in all of the follow-up interviews conducted with community members, as well as on the ripple effect maps documents. One interviewee even noted that the relationships formed were more important than some of the other results of the BR&E process. For example, the ripple effect mapping process encouraged a change in attitude and behavior among businesses in the community. The interviewee explained there had not been a great relationship between businesses owners and members of City Hall. As a result, businesses owners did not seek their help with problems they faced. During the BR&E process, however, the businesses experienced a change in attitude that facilitated a better relationship with City Hall. Business owners now view City Hall as an approachable entity that can help solve their problems.

Many attitudes were changed in Menahga through the opportunity to have positive conversations about the community. The BR&E process helped people get to know others in the town and brought people together. On Hugo's ripple effect map, it was clear businesses owners felt better about the city and ended up referring each other to the city for assistance when it was needed for their business.

Another change in attitude that led to strong relationships occurred in Lyon County. The community's ripple effect map showed how conversations and learning activities about the county's businesses built trust and goodwill among the participants. The map also showed how these new relationships eventually led to the creation of a code of ethics for economic development in the county. Additionally, having city employees visit businesses owners helped build positive relationships, as it reinforced that the city cared about their work. Individuals from smaller towns in Lyon County who were initially skeptical about cooperating with the county seat (Marshall) experienced a change in their attitude as a result of the good things that happened during the BR&E collaboration.

In Monticello, the ripple effect map showed that relationships improved between the city and businesses. A main reason for this change is that business owners felt the city valued their input and wanted them to succeed. Businesses also realized they can call the city whenever they need to. Furthermore, members of City Hall became more proactive in reaching out to businesses and attending public social/cultural events organized by the businesses.

On the ripple effect map for Forest Lake, it was clear the BR&E process helped change attitudes there as well. The process allowed more communication to happen between businesses and city staff members. This happened during visits to the businesses, which was crucial in

changing attitudes. It also strengthened the connection between the two groups and helped city staff learn more about individual businesses.

Lastly, in Barnesville, businesses started to feel appreciated through the BR&E process and reached out to the city for help. A good energy was created, and that is a sentiment shared by all six communities.

Theme 2: People Connected and Collaborated

Another main theme that arose from the project was connecting and collaborating with others. This theme came up in interviews and across the six ripple effect maps. It is important to note that stakeholders not only connected but also collaborated to achieve a common goal. Hugo's ripple map shows that the Hugo Business Association (HBA) has since taken an active role in the community and has worked closely with City Hall on projects, such as the creation of business events. The creation of business events has now been fully taken on by HBA, but this initiative resulted from collaboration between City Hall and HBA. Additionally, HBA has included time on its meeting agendas for City Hall updates. This shows how much the businesses have been integrated into city plans. A collaborative effort was also evident during discussions about how to market the city of Hugo. The city hosted a public workshop in which key attributes of the city were identified and ideas were shared about how to attract new residents and businesses to the city.

In Lyon County, a collaborative effort among the cities of Cottonwood, Tracy, and Marshall, and the Marshall Chamber of Commerce, led to the creation of the Discover Southwest (SW) Minnesota website. This is a resource that cities in the county have found very helpful because it contains useful information, such as houses and commercial properties for sale. This

process brought communities together, and the ones that did not have a website in the past now do.

During an interview, a key informant from Forest Lake said that, although the city already had a close knit community, they were not coordinating their efforts, and as a result, not finding positive solutions to the problems they faced. Though individual businesses owners worked on their own projects, the BR&E program gave them something to work on together. Indeed, Forest Lake's ripple effect map shows that a partnership was formed between businesses and the city to promote economic prosperity. The partnership involved the establishment of a quarterly workshop series and a monthly meeting that includes the city, businesses, schools, the Chamber, and community educators.

One of the collaborative efforts in Monticello happened through the creation of projects to enhance the communication between the city and its businesses. The city was lobbied to approve a comprehensive transportation plan, and this involved the formation of a committee at the city level.

The final example of this theme is from the ripple effect map of Menahga (in 2013), which shows a "Community Meeting with 30 Folks". Through this collaborative effort, the idea to build housing for seniors in the community emerged. Senior housing had been on the community's radar before the BR&E program, but participants at the second ripple mapping session (in 2016) said that the BR&E process had a catalyzing effect in finally building the housing.

Theme 3: New Ideas were Shared

Sharing ideas was another key theme seen in all six communities. In Barnesville, one way this happened was through business networking events. An important idea that was shared

addressed ways in which businesses can market themselves to the public. These networking events have been a hit, and as a result, the community is looking for ways to have them more frequently.

On the ripple effect map for Menahga, one can see that some of the ideas shared included social media techniques and activities planned for the future. Lyon County also created the Lyon County Business Summit. It is an annual event, now called the Informational Summit, which everyone in the community is invited to. At the event, business leaders give an update on their businesses and what is going on in the community. They also talk about their expansion plans and the reason they feel it is important to be involved in the community. Additionally, the community is presented with statistics about the area economy and news about big events coming up.

In Monticello, a concierge team was formed to increase awareness about the resources available in Monticello. This led to the development of a website that advertises these resources. The concierge team also organized tours for businesses to visit each other's facilities, an initiative that has helped businesses learn about regulatory and zoning issues from each other. A person interviewed from Hugo said people were excited to share their information during this process. According to the ripple effect map, one of the ways ideas were shared was through the creation of a business list. While a rudimentary procedure, it helped city staffers get to know Hugo businesses. Businesses were then invited to events happening in the city since the city shared resources with them. Something important that happened in all six communities was increased community awareness of the challenges they faced. This is necessary to achieve the goals of the BR&E process.

Lastly, on the ripple effect map for Forest Lake, it showed increased engagement with the public. This included five community conversations that involved 30 to 50 attendees a piece. The five conversations consisted of three night sessions, one 1 business session, and one school session.

Theme 4: Community Businesses were Supported

Another key theme that arose was the support of community businesses. In the city of Hugo, an entrepreneurial boot camp was organized for home-based businesses and emerging businesses. There were also “Create, Coordinate and Encourage” events hosted to support local businesses. A key result of the BR&E is that it spurred the Hugo Business Association (HBA) to become a more active entity; it now offers more support to the business community. For instance, HBA worked in cooperation with the city to create promotional opportunities for businesses in the community. One example is business coupons distributed at a community football tournament. Additionally, five business breakfast workshops were held for 70-80 attendees, and each participant received information to help them with their businesses.

In Monticello, businesses were supported through the development of a greater commitment to the business community. There are big plans for using substantial investment to improve the downtown area, which will benefit the businesses.

On the ripple effect map for Lyon County, it is clear businesses are supported through the creation of a training calendar that will provide the necessary resources needed by businesses to succeed. There are also plans for developing a “How to Start a Business” guidebook that will help people who are considering starting a business.

In Barnesville, entrepreneurial support is provided through an activity known as “Spark Your Business.” This was a competition in which winners were given forgivable loans for their

startup businesses. Additionally, four succession planning seminars were held with the goal of helping businesses through transitional issues. The key informant interviewed from Barnesville acknowledged the need to better educate startup businesses and to encourage them to ask for help when needed. She stressed that the public needs to be educated about, and made aware of, the “blood, sweat and tears” that go into the opening of a business. This knowledge will help the public to develop a sense of appreciation for the businesses in the community.

In Forest Lake, a quarterly workshop series was established, and a task force was formed to address issues businesses face.

Lastly, the city of Menahga put on a Career Exposition Fair that provided a great networking opportunity between high school students and the business community. The event has now become an annual affair.

Theme 5: Community Action was Sparked

The last theme highlighted revolved around the changes made after the BR&E process. In Lyon County, the key informant discussed how the BR&E process is similar to Grow Minnesota⁵, a business outreach and assistance program already in place in the city. The major difference, according to the interviewee, is that the BR&E program is more formalized. The BR&E program allowed Lyon County to analyze the data they had collected to determine the issues the community faced and then create an action plan. Additionally, the process gave tangible examples that could be presented to the City Administrator about the issues businesses in the community faced and what can be done to help. Lyon County continues to do BR&E visits to this day, mostly with Grow Minnesota. In 2016, the city of Tracy, a smaller town in the

⁵ Grow Minnesota is a private-sector led business retention, assistance and expansion program sponsored by the Minnesota Chamber of Commerce (<https://www.mnchamber.com/grow/grow-minnesota-0>).

county, did 39 business visits and used Extension's BR&E Strategies process to choose priority projects for implementation⁶.

A similar experience to Lyon County occurred in Barnesville. There, the BR&E process provided documented proof of business concerns and was then presented to the city council. This, in turn, helped the development of action plans intended to solve these issues.

In Hugo, the BR&E process helped City Hall realize that businesses wanted them to address the aesthetic issue in the city by taking down some of the old buildings. City Hall was not aware that the business community did not like the blighted buildings, so they were left up because they thought people had an attachment to them. However, the process helped them learn that there wasn't an attachment and thus four blighted buildings were removed. Additionally, City Hall worked with MNDOT to address some of the Highway 61 access issues in the downtown area that would help the businesses.

In Forest Lake, as a direct result of the BR&E, the city recognized that the signing ordinance was a little too restrictive for businesses to be successful, so the city worked on making them less so. The ripple effect map shows that blighted properties in the downtown area were demolished and there is increased mowing of the grass along the Highway 61 corridor. Note that Hugo and Forest Lake are neighboring communities, both of which addressed Highway 61 issues through their BR&E initiatives.

Conclusion

The examples above illustrate how the BR&E process helped the Minnesota communities of Forest Lake, Lyon County, Barnesville, Hugo, Monticello, and Menahga. Each community identified some of the problems facing local businesses. Each example above came directly

⁶ Reported by Neil Linscheid, University of Minnesota Extension Educator, June 1, 2016.

from the ripple effect maps, and yet many more are not mentioned here. The highlighted examples were themes that occurred in all six communities.

According to the ripple effect maps and follow-up interviews conducted in May 2016, the BR&E Program assisted communities with finding solutions for the issues identified during the business visits. The communities were very enthusiastic about the Extension BR&E Program, and the key informants interviewed were all very pleased with the results produced through their BR&E initiatives. The hope is that these initial results will ripple into even bigger results and help community businesses become sustainable and expand over time.

Appendix

Community	Date
Monticello	09/21/2011
Lyon County	01/26/2012
Hugo	02/21/2012
Forest Lake	11/08/2012
Menahga	10/01/2013
Barnesville	04/14/2016
Menahga (2nd Ripple Effect Map)	05/17/2016

Table 1: Dates when ripple effect maps were conducted in each community